

A CHILLING COLLECTION

Selected by HELEN HOKE

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The Davenport

Jack Ritchie

When feeling weary and wishing to take a short shut-eye, your davenport at home may seem a haven of peace. But this particular davenport had a personality all its own and could guarantee you complete peace.

"How long has your husband been missing?" Detective Sergeant Whittier asked.

Mrs. Brenner had angry dark eyes. "Since this morning at ten o'clock." She pointed to the davenport upon which Whittier sat. "He has Wednesdays off and he was lying right there, like he always does. I went downstairs to get the mail out of our box in the vestibule. When I got back, he was gone."

Whittier put that down in his notebook. "Have you checked with friends?"

"Of course. None of them have seen him. Besides, I went over his things in our closet. All of his clothes are still there. All of them. It's freezing outside and he certainly wouldn't go out without taking at least his topcoat and hat."

She indicated a pair of shoes beside the davenport. "Besides, those are his shoes. He certainly wouldn't leave the building without them, and none of his other pairs is missing."

Whittier found himself stifling a yawn. Strange, he thought, I wasn't the least bit sleepy when I came here, but now I can hardly keep my eyes open.

He forced his mind back to Henry Brenner. Very likely Henry had yielded to a sudden impulse to walk out on his wife. Stocking feet and

all. The odds were that he'd be back as soon as whatever money he took with him ran out. "Would you know how much money your husband carried with him?"

She shrugged. "Henry didn't believe in carrying a lot of cash with him. He always gave me his paycheck and if he really needed anything, all he had to do was ask for it and usually I'd see that he got it. He *wanted* it that way."

Of course, Whittier thought. He stifled another yawn. "Could you give me a description of your husband?"

"He was about average size. Thinning at the top. A little overweight. He was wearing one of his old white shirts and brown slacks."

"Have you talked to the building superintendent? Perhaps he's seen your husband."

"He hasn't. We even searched the laundry room, the storage locker, and the whole basement. Henry isn't anywhere."

"Couldn't he have dropped in at one of your neighbors? Somebody in the building?"

She rejected that. "We don't know anybody in the building more than to nod to. We mind our own business and they mind theirs. Something's happened to Henry. I just know it."

Perhaps he has friends you don't know about, Whittier thought. Maybe he's in a poker game somewhere in the building and forgot about the time. Maybe there's even another woman.

Whittier stirred, vaguely uneasy. Somehow he had the strange impression that Henry was close. Very close. "Have you searched this apartment?"

"Yes. I thought he might just be trying to frighten me. But he isn't anywhere." She glared at the davenport. "The minute Henry got home from work, he'd take off his shoes and just lie there. Most of the time he didn't even bother to look at television or even to read. He just went to sleep. I wonder what he ever saw in just lying there day after day. Sometimes I thought he'd turn into a davenport himself."

Whittier touched one of the cushions beside him. Yes, it was really quite a comfortable piece of furniture. One had the overwhelming

impulse to lie down. The davenport felt almost as though it were a living contented thing.

Mrs. Brenner moved closer and stared narrow-eyed. "That's not our davenport."

Whittier looked at the cushion again. "It isn't"?

"It *looks* like our davenport. But it's different. I can feel it. It's not ours. Where did it come from?"

Whittier sighed. Why not outer space? It's a creature invading the earth disguised as a davenport. Perhaps there are thousands of them now on earth. No home is complete without one.

Whittier smiled at another thought. Suppose that Henry had for some reason wandered out into the hall and returned to what he *thought* was his apartment and was even now waiting for his wife to come back with the mail. Or sleeping on some strange couch. After all, these were furnished apartments and all of them probably looked somewhat alike.

Mrs. Brenner seemed to think of something. "Do you suppose that Henry might have left a note or something explaining everything in our mailbox downstairs?"

"It's a possibility," Whittier said. "Why don't you look?"

Whittier watched her leave and then yawned. There was something incredibly soporific about this davenport. You felt that you really must lie down. He stretched out and closed his eyes. It was delightful just to lie here and think of nothing at all. Nothing at all.

His breathing slowly deepened and after a few moments more he fell asleep.

A minute passed. Another.

The back of the davenport slowly extended itself and—as it had earlier in the day—folded gently over another sleeping man.

And quietly ate him.